DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 904 CS 506 490

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TITLE A Classroom Meeting of Minds.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; High Schools; High School Students; *Speech Curriculum; Student Research; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Meeting of Minds

ABSTRACT

Steve Allen's "Meeting of Minds" television series (in which historical figures from different periods meet) and Hendrik Willem van Loon's "Van Loon's Lives" (which details a imagined dinner where guests meet) both present a concept which is readily adaptable to high school communication classes because it incorporates numerous elements which are addressed in multi-faceted secondary courses. Each student can be assigned to research one of the chosen personages in order to simulate that person in conversation with other historical figures. This research assignment extends beyond discovering what a person invented or wrote or conquered--to explore the way a person thought, responded, and accepted or challenged the values of a particular period in history. The idea offers an opportunity to integrate several elements in a communication course, emphasize interdisciplinary connections, and involve an entire class in a project which holds students' interest and challenges their creativity. (RAE)

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A CLASSROOM MEETING OF MINDS

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A Classroom Meeting of Minds

Several years ago, Steve Allen created a critically acclaimed series for public television entitled "Meeting of Minds." Six scripts from the program were later published under the same title.[1] The concept of this program was a meeting of historical figures, usually from different time periods. A moderator asked questions designed to elicit information and opinions and spark informal debate among the panel of guests. The first program in the series featured a conversation among Theodore Roosevelt, Cleopatra, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Paine. A similar concept was developed in the classic Van Loon's Lives by Hendrik Willem van Loon, in which each chapter details an imagined dinner during which guests meet, explain themselves, and often challenge each other's views.[2] One of van Loon's chapters describes a meeting of Beethoven, Napoleon, and the author's own great-great-grandfather. The efforts to achieve authenticity made Allen's program and van Loon's book memorable--and each offered a creative form of education to viewers or readers.

This concept is readily adaptable to high school communication classes because it incorporates numerous elements which are addressed in multi-faceted secondary courses. While requiring considerable planning and class time, a project based on this concept might replace some shorter assignments and serve to integrate several course goals.

The van Loon book gives considerable attention to planning menus, music, and conversational topics which would please the

guests by recognizing their personal tastes and the customs of their cultures and time periods. A similar preparation stage can involve an entire class in basic research, decision-making, discussion, and organized planning. Opportunities also exist for interdisciplinary involvement by consulting instructors of history, music, literature, and home economics; some of these teachers may even choose to incorporate parallel units into their own courses.

Each student can be assigned to research one of the chosen personages in order to simulate that person in conversation with other historical figures. This research assignment extends beyond discovering what a person invented or wrote or conquered--to explore the way a person thought, responded, and accepted or challenged the values of a particular period in history. Thus, instead of reading a biography of Joseph McCarthy, a student might listen to tapes of the Army-McCarthy hearings. In addition to reading Walden, a student might read the play The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail to perceive the way Thoreau might have responded in dialogue.[3] In an effort to see the Vietnam War from a nurse's personal view, a student could read Lynda Van Devanter's memoir Home Before Morning.[4] In order to sense the thinking of a pioneer, a student might read the letters of pioneer women collected in Let Them Speak For Themselves or possibly even find family letters saved from earlier generations.[5] To understand the thinking of twentieth-century authors, students might draw on the collection of taped interviews avail-

able from the American Audio Prose Library.[6] The exploration into each character will differ and may show a student that research can be far more interesting and diverse than previously experienced.

The discussion among each group of historical figures presents a particular challenge to the group leader, who must do sufficient research to ask appropriate questions. In this instance, the leader is a host as well as moderator and this dual role allows a class to observe the difference between social leadership and task leadership, and see the difficulty of achieving both at once. For contrast, some groups might be assigned two leaders with the social and task roles divided. For many high school students, this experience presents a new view of leadership, for the intent is not to move the participants toward a pre-established goal--but to create a setting and atmosphere in which the characters and ideas of the guests can be revealed.

Following the discussion among the historical figures, the entire class can become involved through a question-answer forum. An alternative is a more structured follow-up in which one or two prepared students serve as questioners, similar to the format used by William Buckley's Firing Line on public television.

Depending on the time available for this project, several other communication elements can also be incorporated. Case studies which speculate about the intrapersonal communication of historical figures (their doubts, second thoughts, anxieties, and aspirations) can increase character development and enable

empathy with persons who otherwise seem very different and distant. Informative or persuasive speeches can be given in character by the "historical figures" on topics of importance in their time. Audience analysis can be done to better understand the listeners who would have been addressed by such speeches. Elements of drama--ranging from costuming and basic props to creation of dialogue and production of scenes--can be incorporated if so desired.

A meeting of minds as described above is a flexible and adaptable concept which can be tailored to a teacher's particular goals. At best, the idea offers an opportunity to integrate several elements in a communication course, emphasize interdisciplinary connections, and involve an entire class in a project which holds students' interest and challenges their creativity.

NOTES

[1]Steve Allen, Meeting of Minds (Los Angeles: Hubris House, 1978).

[2]Hendrik Willem van Loon, Van Loon's Lives (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942).

[3]Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail (New York: Bantam, 1970.

[4]Lynda Van Devanter and Christopher Morgan, Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam (New York: Beaufort, 1983).

[5]Christiane Fischer, Ed., Let Them Speak For Themselves: Women in the American West 1849-1900 (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1977).

[6]A catalog is available from American Audio Prose Library, P.O. Box 842, Columbia, MO 65205.